

Youth Gangs in Schools

Youth gangs are linked with serious crime problems in elementary and secondary schools in the United States. A report issued by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice found that the percentage of students reporting the presence of gangs at school nearly doubled between 1989 and 1995. This report also found a strong correlation between the presence of gangs and both guns and drugs in school. Higher percentages of students reported knowing a student who brought a gun to school when gangs were present (25%) versus when gangs were not present (8%). In addition, gang presence increased the likelihood of seeing a student with a gun at school: 12% of the students surveyed reported having seen a student with a gun in school when gangs were present, compared with 3% when gangs were not present. Students who reported that drugs (marijuana, cocaine, crack or uppers/downers) were readily available at school were much more likely to report gangs at their school (35%) than those who said that no drugs were available (14%). The presence of gangs more than doubled the likelihood of violent victimizations at school (nearly 8%, compared to 3%).

Characteristics of Gangs in Schools

The report stated that 28% of the surveyed students reported gangs in schools. To assess the characteristics of these gangs, students were asked to indicate how they knew street gangs existed by responding to the questions of: had a name; had a recognized leader; had their own territory or turf; tagged or marked turf with graffiti; committed violent acts; spent time with other members of the gang; wore clothing or other items to identify their gang membership; and had tattoos.

Between 33% and 80% of students used one of these criteria to define gangs. Students could use more than one indicator of gang existence. Most students used three of the indicators as evidence of a gang: having a name (80%), spending time with other members of the gang (80%), and wearing clothing or other items to identify their gang membership (71%). The fourth most frequently used indicator was tagging or marking turf (56%), followed by violent gang activity (50%). Thus, it appears that students often, but not always, associate the groups they call "gangs" with violent acts. The least frequently used indicators, in descending order of importance, were: territory or turf (47%), tattoos (37%), and recognized leader (33%).

Demographic Characteristics

Significant differences appear in the age and race/ethnicity of students reporting gangs in schools. The percentage of students reporting gang presence in their schools increased considerably with age: 26% and 34% of students ages 12 and 13 respectively, reported gang presence, compared with an average of 41% for students ages 14-19. More than one-fourth (26%) of 12 year olds reported gangs in their schools, and more than one-third of 13 years olds and 40% of 14 year olds reported gangs. Fifteen year olds were most likely to report gangs (43%).

Consideration of gang criminal involvement (violence, drug sales, and carrying guns, as measured by the gang crime scale) changes how students of different ages perceive gangs in school. On average, 31% of the students reported that the gangs in their schools were not involved in any of the three specified criminal activities. Of the 12 year old students, 43% said that the gangs in their schools were not involved in any of the three types of criminal activity. The proportion decreased each year up to age 16, at which only 26% of the students said that the gangs in their schools were not involved in criminal activities. At age 17, the proportion rose to 31%; at age 19, it fell to a low of 25%.

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

Missouri Women's Council

421 East Dunklin Street ~ PO Box 1684 ~ Jefferson City, Missouri 65102
Toll Free in Missouri: (877) 426-9284 ~ (573) 751-0810 ~ Fax: (573) 751-8835
WebSite: www.womenscouncil.org ~ Email: wcouncil@mail.state.mo.us

Population Size

The presence of gangs in schools increases with the size of the community, up to 50,000. The response from students living in areas with populations of 50,000 or larger did not vary greatly (from 51% to 54% of these students reported gangs). The highest percentages of student reports of gangs were not in the most populated areas but rather in areas with populations between 100,000 and 249,999 (54%), followed closely by areas with populations between 250,000 and 999,999 (53%). Students in areas with populations of 1 million or more were slightly less likely to report gangs (51%). Even in the smallest jurisdictions (populations smaller than 1,000), 23% of students reported gangs in their schools.

Urban and rural areas were compared using the composite measure of gang presence. One-quarter (25%) of students attending schools in rural areas reported gangs in their schools, compared with 43% of students in all urban areas. In another population comparison, 51% of students in schools with central cities of metropolitan statistical areas (MSA's) reported gangs, in contrast with 36% of students in suburban areas of MSA's and 27% of students outside MSA's.

Household Income

Gang presence varied significantly with household income. At the lowest income level (less than \$7,500), the largest percentage (47%) of students reported gangs in their schools. As income levels increased, reported gang presence decreased. However, reports of gang presence were fairly evenly distributed across households with income levels of \$12,500 to more than \$50,000. This finding is not surprising, given the pervasive presence of gangs in schools.

Drug Availability

Students were asked whether "it is easy, hard, or impossible to get" drugs (including alcohol, marijuana, crack, or other forms of cocaine, uppers/downers, LSD, PCP, heroin, and other illegal drugs) at school. While none of the drugs was easy to get, only 25% of surveyed students said gangs were present. This percentage increased from 42% when only one drug was readily available to 69% when seven drugs were readily available, and then dropped slightly when eight or nine drugs were readily available. Thus, gangs were significantly more prevalent when a large number of drugs were easy to get at schools.

Victimization Prevalence

A victimization prevalence measure was developed using student responses to three survey questions: during the past 6 months, did anyone take money or things directly from you by force, weapons or threats at school; during the last 6 months, did anyone steal something from your desk, locker, or some other place at school (other than any incidents just mentioned); and other than the incidents just mentioned, did anyone physically attack you at school during the last six months?

A positive response to any of these three questions correlated significantly with gang presence. When students said gangs were present, 54% of them reported one or more of the three types of victimization, compared with 46% when gangs were not present.

Public or Private School

Using the composite measure of gang presence revealed that the type of school made a significant difference with respect to gang presence. Almost 40% of students in public schools reported that gangs were present, compared with 16% in private schools. Students also were asked if they were "assigned" to the school they attended or if they "chose" that school. Surprisingly, students who chose the school they attending reported significantly more gang presence (47% compared with 39%).

Summary

These analyses indicate that, when a comprehensive measure of gang presence was used, all of the attributes of persons (except gender) and schools that were examined predicted gang prevalence in schools. Hispanic and black 15 year olds from low-income households reported the highest prevalence of gangs in school. These students were most likely to attend public schools that were located within central cities of MSA's with populations between 100,000 and 1 million and characterized by high levels of student victimization, numerous security measures, and a large number of readily available drugs.